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AUTHOR Smith, Jewel E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the theory of John U. Ogbu on minority educational performance and examines some criticisms of his theory put forth by some colleagues. In his cross-cultural studies Ogbu has identified two distinct minority groups, each exhibiting a distinct type of cultural difference in relation to the dominant society. The immigrant, or voluntary, minority group consists of people who "volunteered" to come to this country in search of opportunity. The "castelike," or involuntary, minorities were brought into the society by force, through slavery, conquest, or colonization. While the voluntary minorities exhibit primary cultural differences that existed before their arrival, the involuntary minorities exhibit secondary cultural differences arising after their contact with the dominant culture. The identification of these types of minorities provides a context for discussing problems of academic performance. Principal criticisms of Ogbu's theory come from those who consider it deterministic, those who consider that it lacks empirical support, and those who consider that Ogbu fails to take into account the role of culture in effective learning. Support is offered for Ogbu's theory of why some minorities do better than others in the areas of social adjustment and academic performance. The implications of his ideas for education and for the role of teachers are discussed. (Contains 21 references.) (SLD)

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IN SEARCH OF OGBU

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Jewel E. Smith
Univ. Wisconsin-Madison

Objectives

Few would refute the fact that a quality education is critical to the growth and enhancement of individuals, as well as groups, within society. Education is often the key to the understanding and competence fundamentally linked to human survival and development. Thus, it is not surprising that for more than three decades, researchers have attempted to explain the persistent academic underachievement and social adjustment difficulties experienced by certain minorities, while at the same time addressing the success of others. The task is yet incomplete, but the efforts undertaken thus far have resulted in the birth and refinement of numerous theories and models, some serving to advance the scope and range of this continuing intellectual debate. One such theory is that of John U. Ogbu, professor of anthropology at U.C. Berkeley. The objectives of this paper are to present Ogbu's theory on minority educational performance, and to examine certain persistent criticisms of his theory, as put forth by some of his colleagues. The paper will explore the following questions: 1) What are the principal criticisms of Ogbu's theory? 2) Are the criticisms valid? And 3) If Ogbu is correct in his analysis of the social phenomena of minority school failure, what are the implications?

Theoretical Framework

In his cross-cultural studies, Ogbu identified two distinct minority groups, each exhibiting a distinct type of *cultural difference* in relation to the dominant society. The immigrant, or voluntary, minority group, comprises people who, more or less, "volunteered" to come into the "host society" in pursuit of greater opportunities. Their relationship with the dominant group is essentially based on trust and accommodation; they exhibit *primary* cultural differences, differences existing before their arrival to the "host country". As an example of primary cultural differences, Ogbu notes the dissimilarity of the language spoken by the Punjabi Indians in Valleyside, California, their practice of Sikh, Hindu, or Moslem religion, and the way in which they raise their children. Similarly, the Chinese are an example of an immigrant minority group in the United States. The primary cultural differences exhibited by immigrant minority groups are, essentially, differences in content (Ogbu, 1987, 1982).

In contrast, the "castelike," or involuntary, minorities are so deemed because they are, at birth, relegated to a position of enduring, almost permanent, subordination in society, and are perceived by the dominant group to be inferior (Ogbu, 1993; 1978). Further, they are "involuntary" because their presence in the society was brought about by "force" -- in the form of slavery, colonization, or conquest (Ogbu, 1993). Thus they, unlike their "voluntary" counterparts, were not drawn to America by dreams of prosperity, liberty, and a brighter future for their children. The time, place, and manner of their "incorporation" left no room for the exercise of self-determination.

Membership was compulsory, and a deliberate attempt was made to distort, or destroy, the traditional cultures of involuntary minorities.

According to Ogbu, the involuntary minority exhibits *secondary* cultural differences, differences arising *after* their continuous contact with the dominant culture, contact characterized by the subordination of the involuntary minority. In the United States, this group includes African-Americans, Native-Americans, and Native-Hawaiians. Outside the U.S., such groups include the West Indians in Britain, the Maori in New Zealand, and the Buraka of Japan (Ogbu, 1987). Secondary cultural differences are, essentially, differences in style, not content (Ogbu, 1987). Such stylistic differences have been the focus of considerable research efforts, including those involving cognitive style, communication style, interaction style, and learning style (Ogbu, 1987, 1992).

With respect to the two types of minority groups highlighted in his study, Ogbu argues that it is the "castelike" minority group that experiences persistent, pervasive, social adjustment problems, and academic failure (Ogbu, 1987). "Caste barriers" such as inferior education and job ceilings, for example, promote school failure by diminishing the motivation and effort needed to succeed in school (Ogbu, 1978). Further, Ogbu notes that the systematic denial of equal access to the job market, and the refusal of American society to adequately reward the educational accomplishments of involuntary minorities, served, over time, to discourage their efforts to advance their education, and, perhaps, to achieve academically. He points to the structure of the school itself, a futuristic institution, combined with the social stratification characterizing the society in which the school is located, as two of the primary sources contributing to the castelike minorities' academic failure (Ogbu, 1987).

In this way, Ogbu provides *context* for the events that manifest inside the classroom. Not limiting his research to the confines of the school-community, Ogbu identifies the broader realities, historical as well as contemporary, that may impact the academic performance and social adjustment of the minority child. He refers to these underlying forces as macroecological forces, or cultural-ecological forces (Ogbu, 1981, 1985). That is, Ogbu critically examines the social, economic, and political forces that preserve the "dominance" of the dominant culture, and the marginality of the caste-like minority. Further, it is the care with which the structural barriers have been placed, coupled with the institutionalized legitimacy of the stratification systems, that have combined, over generations, to convince the involuntary minority of the futility of prolonged academic toil (Ogbu, 1987).

A third factor, further exacerbating the problems of academic performance and school adjustment, appears in the form of counterproductive survival strategies, and defense mechanisms, adopted by involuntary minorities in order to "level the playing field", and to protect them from further disappointment in their pursuit of equal opportunity (Ogbu, 1993). These strategies manifest in the form of oppositional cultural

practices, such as a disregard for school, and alternative folk theories for "getting ahead" that may involve illegal activity. A kind of *cultural inversion* results from the presence of two cultures existing in opposition to one another. In this way, the cultural differences that involuntary minorities encounter in their school environment, pose greater problems for them than for immigrant children. While immigrant children view their "differences" as obstacles to transcend, involuntary minorities view their "differences" as boundaries that must not to be crossed (Ogbu, 1992). So ingrained is the idea of oppositional cultural practices, that it is not uncommon for minorities to be alienated from other members of the group for violating its dictates (Ogbu, 1987).

According to Ogbu, these forces----society, school, and community, combine in the most devastating way to severely inhibit the ability of castelike minority children to succeed in school and in society (Ogbu, 1993; 1987). Thus, Ogbu states, " . . . the main factor differentiating the more successful from the less successful minorities, appears to be the nature of the history, subordination, and exploitation of the minorities, *and* the nature of the minorities' *own* instrumental and expressive responses to their treatment, which enter into the process of their schooling." (Ogbu, 1987:88). However, some scholars disagree with Ogbu's findings. The principal criticisms on which this paper will focus come from those who describe Ogbu's theory as deterministic (Erickson, 19987; Foley, 1991), lacking in empirical evidence and failing to take into account the role of culture in effective learning (Trueba, 1991; Foley, 1991), and exceedingly negative and "race focused" in its assessment of the castelike minorities' oppositional culture (Foley, 1991).

Results

Three of the four criticisms cited above could result from a misinterpretation of Ogbu's theory. First, Erickson asserts that, "Ogbu's theory is economically deterministic, and lacks room for human agency." Erickson fails to take into account that the social, economic and political subordination of involuntary minorities was by design, an invention of the dominant group. The inherently oppressive characteristics of this stratification are not without "known" causes. Indeed, the cause is structural and could be dismantled just as it was constructed. Perhaps this is the "human agency" on which we should focus. To the extent that the socio-economic stratification persists in our society, resulting from institutional and structural forces, the economic fate of castelike minorities is decidedly circumscribed. Ogbu identifies a pattern of discriminatory practices, from job ceilings to unequal pay scales (Ogbu, 1974, 1987). The persistence and pervasiveness of discriminatory policies and practices in America are well documented. So the question becomes: Is it Ogbu's theory that is economically deterministic, or it is the persistent backwardness evidenced in American domestic policy that is deterministic?

Clearly, the inferior education traditionally "reserved" for minority children must be abandoned in favor of a more egalitarian system of education, one that prepares minorities for membership, and effective leadership, in adult society (Ogbu, 1978). This change must occur not only in the classroom, but in the area of educational policy as well.

Second, it is difficult to see how Ogbu's theory ignores or discounts the influence of culture on effective learning. On the contrary, he stresses its importance when he discusses the oppositional cultural frame-of-reference devices employed by involuntary minorities---such as cultural inversion, and the oppositional identity, especially as it relates to speech, as hindrances to social adjustment and academic success in school (Ogbu, 1993); he notes that such behaviors further inhibit the ability of the involuntary minority to transcend cultural barriers, as other minorities have. These statements suggest that, indeed, culture has a significant impact on effective learning. According to Trueba, Ogbu's heuristic classification of minorities is ". . . unfounded and highly stereotypic. . ." (Trueba, 1991: 276). One can hardly dismiss the more than twenty years of close observation and study, in the United States and elsewhere, on which the heuristic distinctions are based (Ogbu, 1993; 1978). Speaking directly on his use of heuristic classifications Ogbu states, ". . . it is not intended to stereotype the minorities, just as it is not stereotyping them to classify them as linguistic and nonlinguistic minorities." (Ogbu, 1987). It is not uncommon for cultural difference theorists, including Trueba, to use such distinctions in advancing their own theories on minority performance in school. Concerning the criticism of his research abroad, Ogbu concedes that the data he obtained from these studies may have been compromised by the stage of development of the social sciences there. (Ogbu, 1978).

Third, to stress that Ogbu's characterization of involuntary minorities is very "negative" in its assessment of their oppositional culture, is to trivialize the accuracy of his portrayal. Further, Ogbu is not alone in identifying the presence of oppositional cultural identities among involuntary minorities (Erickson, 1987; Smith, 1988; Valentine, 1989; Madhubuti, 1993). The issue is not whether these practices lead to a negative characterization of the involuntary minorities' coping strategies. The issue is whether these practices *effectively* respond to their survival needs, assists in their adaptation in a society in which they are subordinated, and insures their survival in an increasingly hostile society. In view of these goals, oppositional cultural practices that further restrict the life-chances of involuntary minorities, while inhibiting their ability to effectively respond to the oppressive forces surrounding them, could, and should, be viewed negatively.

Finally, according to Foley, Ogbu places "excessive" emphasis on race in his analysis of oppositional culture (Foley, 1991). With respect to the issue of race, when one looks at the historical experiences of African-Americans, one sees that regardless of social class background, the obstacles they have faced in their efforts to achieve upward social mobility, have not disappeared (Ogbu, 1978). According to Ogbu, "The subordinate racial status of blacks, their collective identity and their perceptions of their opportunity structure, have the combined effect of differentiating their strategies for social mobility ,

in some significant ways, from those strategies employed by the general population." (Ogbu, 1978:7-8). Ogbu elaborates on the differing subsistence strategies employed by subordinate and dominant groups in his discussion of "instrumental competencies", a component of his cultural-ecological model (Ogbu, 1981).

Regrettably, racism in America is a historical, and contemporary, reality. As such, it must be continually identified, and confronted. It legitimizes societal inequities and nourishes discriminatory practices. It may well give rise to a society stratified on the basis of race. Excessive? Consider Ogbu's definition of a racially stratified society. "A racially stratified society is one in which racial groups are hierarchically organized into subordinate and dominant groups and in which the groups so organized are differentiated in terms of closure, affiliation, and status summation. *Closure* refers to the absence of approved mobility from one ranked group to another; *rules of affiliation* are generally explicit as to which group children of interracial matings belong; and *status summation* refers to the use of racial-group membership to assign people their social, economic, political, and other valued roles." (Ogbu, 1978). If one adopts Ogbu's definition, one is compelled to conclude that, in America, there exists a racially stratified society. Thus, it would be exceedingly misguided for a researcher to overlook, or de-emphasize, the destructive and ubiquitous presence of race in American social policy. Rather than an excessive *emphasis* on race, what is truly excessive, it seems, is the amount of time spent *avoiding* a "direct hit" on the issue.

Where do we go from here? Having presented some of Obgu's research findings, what are the implications? If Ogbu is correct in his theories on why some minorities do better than others in social adjustment and academic performance, then one may ask if society is morally obligated to disband the systems of stratification which it has created, and long upheld. One may question whether the educational policy at the national level must be reassessed and dramatically restructured, in order to address the historical and continuing inequities in our society, so that it truly reflects the egalitarian ideology that it purports to uphold. Further, one may insist that such reassessment and restructuring transcends the educational arena, reverberating to all areas in which minorities are subordinated. Why? Such is the pervasiveness, and logical consequence, of a contextualized, multilevel, macroethnographic analysis.

Educational Importance of the Study

This study is significant because it exemplifies the continuous effort to construct and clarify the issues as they relate the struggle for cultural inclusion, and economic empowerment of all people. Further, Ogbu's work represents a significant body of knowledge, and should be studied. Through his research, we acquire a compelling explanation for interpreting the phenomenon of minority school failure and social adjustment difficulties, so prevalent among some minority groups. Ogbu's macroecological

research has empowered the researcher, as well as the educator, by providing a clearer theoretical framework for advancing the cause of equity in all phases of membership in society. Access to a quality education is necessary, but not sufficient, for the success of the struggle for equality. Nevertheless, education must serve as a vehicle, not an obstacle, for the attainment of total inclusion with respect to subordinate groups.

Trueba asks, "What is the payoff of such a conceptual frame? What do we understand better that we did not before? What can teachers do with this 'theory' of underachievement?" (Trueba, 1986). It seems that Trueba later recognized the "payoff" of Ogbu's conceptual framework when he noted, "Since the early 1980s most educational anthropologists have rightfully granted Ogbu that there is a legitimate need for redirecting anthropological inquiry in such a way that explanations of minority school performance take into consideration the broader social, economic, and political context." (Trueba, 1991).

Undoubtedly, what we come to "understand better", as a result of Ogbu's theoretical framework, are the effects of the societal forces which militate against the advancement of subordinate groups. We "understand better" the negative impact of decontextualized educational research, policies, and classroom practices, on the continued marginalization of subordinate groups. Finally, as a result of Ogbu's theoretical framework, we are able to "understand better" how an educational system that implements a "student- centered" curriculum without regard for the unique cultural and historical realities that shape the perceptions of those students, specifically their perceptions regarding education, can actually contribute to societal inequities and abuses.

The question remains: What is the role of teachers in Ogbu's theoretical framework? It follows that teachers should adopt, or further implement, contextualized teaching practices and perspectives, abandoning approaches that fail to take into account the historical and contemporary forces giving rise to the negative perceptions about education that many of their students hold. (Paradise, 1994). Further, they should create a classroom atmosphere that assists subordinate groups in crossing cultural or language boundaries, without the accompanying fear of abandoning their own culture (Ogbu, 1990). Ogbu's theoretical framework challenges the hierarchy of power maintained by the dominant group, while stressing the need for greater self-determination on the part of the subordinate groups. Numerous scholars, and educators, have acknowledged the power and insight of Ogbu's research, frequently citing his work in their own scholarly presentations. Even Foley, despite his noted criticisms, regards Ogbu's theories on castes as, "... clearly anthropology's most powerful general explanation of minority school failure." (Foley, 1991:71).

Why is this study important? Perhaps it is important because it represents an awareness of, and *an initial* response to, the continuous need to assess the discourse surrounding the disturbing social phenomenon of minority school failure.

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